

Home Life on Early Ranches of Southwest Texas

CHAPTER VII

James Rumsey Skiles Karnes County



Ruins of the old Skiles home as it looks today. It stands about three miles southwest of Falls City on the San Antonio River.

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JAMES RUMSEY SKILES and Eliza Bell Skiles had lived at Kinloch near Bowling Green, Kentucky, twenty-one years when, in 1845, they decided to move to Texas. Colonel Skiles, as he was generally called, thought his health would be better in Texas. He had been in Texas once before and each time he heard of a cavalcade of land-seekers going to Texas his desire to become a resident grew stronger. His father had been an Indian fighter in the Great Lakes region, before moving to Kentucky in 1803. As he did not like to contend with the petty jealousies of a small town he established a store at "Three Springs" on the road between Lexington and Nashville and near Bowling Green.

Becoming prosperous, he engaged as a tutor for his children a "United Irishman" who had been exiled from the old country because of his political beliefs. From this teacher James Rumsey gained a thorough knowledge of the English language and a love for liberty. He never looked into a grammar, an arithmetic or an algebra until he went to college, but learned all the rules from the dictation of his teacher, and got his reading lessons from the journal—news-paper—of that time.

Colonel Skiles had a dynamic personality, yet a persuasive manner, and had the power of attaching friends to himself who never doubted his honor. "Now, he will say just what he thinks," he considered the most gratifying introduction when he got up to make a speech.

From his earliest youth he is said to have entertained the most devoted regard for women. And from the time he married Eliza Bell, just 16 years of age, in 1824, to the day of her death more than fifty years later his love for her almost amounted to idolatry.

Eliza Bell Skiles had lived in Nashville until her marriage. She had the best educational advantages of that day.

Though she had never lived in the country before it was "a matter of course" with her that there would always be a sufficient number of negro slaves to do the work.

So while Colonel Skiles was busy directing the affairs of his large plantation and managing his store which supplied the needs of his tenants, she devoted her time to household duties in their big country home and caring for their four living children. Having lost five children, four of whom died in infancy, one can imagine why she did not want to move to a frontier home situated 35 miles from a physician. But, her husband's wish was law with her.

Land Was Cheap

The prospects were painted in bright colors. Some land could be acquired from the State by paying the fees of office and for surveying. Most any amount of additional land could be bought cheaply. A steady procession of land seekers had settled in Texas during the ten years of the Texas Republic.

The Skiles came down the Mississippi and through the Gulf to Galveston and overland to Goliad in 1845. They brought lovely furniture including a baby grand piano, china, sterling silver, horses and carriages, and a large number of slaves. The journey from Galveston to Goliad was slow and tiresome and they were glad to stop for a few days visit with friends. One night while taking the rifles out of the carriages the youngest son, George Walderman, accidentally shot and killed himself. The shock was nearly too much for the frail Mrs. Skiles. Naturally this sad incident made it still harder for her to adjust herself to her new life. But when another son, William Russell, regained his health she was quite happy.

William Russell entered college at Goliad, and again contracted tuberculosis, probably due to intense study. He then went to Monterrey where he thought he fully recovered. He joined Van Dorn's expedition to take the Yankees in Matagorda. Sometime later he died at Brownsville of tuberculosis while trying to return to Monterrey.

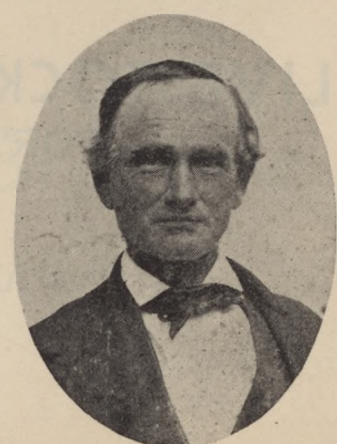
Meanwhile the Skiles family had settled about three miles from the present town of Falls City. The land was wonderfully situated, according to Colonel Skiles. Woods enough, and fields

enough, and splendid meadowland and an abundance of water. He secured about two thousand acres; laid out the lots for residences, a Presbyterian Church, a cemetery and a college, planned to colonize and call the town Marcellena. The town was to have been in the valley with the Skiles home on a high hill overlooking the town. He built a grist mill. Fields were laid out on which he expected to grow corn to feed the work stock and cane for syrup. And he spent large sums of money trying to raise an orchard of several acres on the hill. But they had such drouths. He kept sheep and wild game was plentiful. It was easy to start a herd for cattle were cheap and the "wild" ones were to be had for the taking. Mr. Skiles later engaged in the cattle business. His son and son-in-law went up the trail and the three of them acquired great herds.

In the meantime the home, including slave quarters, was laid out on a large scale. The barn was built first and the family lived in it. Then they built another house, two rooms above the ground and two in the basement. This was to be the servants' quarters. The main building, or the dwelling for the family was to have had four rooms on the first floor and four on the second story with a porch extending all the way around. Original plans called for all of the buildings to have been connected by a roof. Each room had a high ceiling and a fire place. The buildings were made of rock quarried near there with slave labor and hauled by ox teams. Wood work for the windows and doors came from New Orleans. The doors and windows with the Venetian blinds were constructed so they would roll back into the walls. Fire places were built on the second story and the walls were started, the stairway built and the windows put in. But many of them were destroyed during the storm of 1886 by branches from the large trees coming through



ELIZA BELL SKILES



JAMES RUMSEY SKILES

the windows and the second story was never finished.

The slaves were freed after the Civil War so there was neither labor nor money available to complete the work. The slaves did not remain with the family after they were freed. The family fortune was never restored. The land was pastured by the cattlemen for a while for just enough money to pay the taxes.

Some Rare Old Books

But probably the family was happier than it had ever been. They had brought with them from Kentucky a wonderful library including the works of Shakespeare and Dickens. A grand daughter, Miss Maggie Skiles, who lives in Karnes City, still has some of her grandfather's rare old books. Among them are copies of Cowper and Tennyson printed in 1834 and a copy of Coleridge and Keats printed in 1835 which was purchased in 1853. Colonel Skiles was very fond of poetry.

The entire family spent many happy evenings reading or playing cards around the fireside. The daughter, Carolyn, Mrs. Henry M. Beverly, was an accomplished musician. The family frequently sang while she played.

While the members of the family were compelled to do much of the labor which the slaves had done in the past many conventions of the Southern home were still observed. Meals were served rather formally. Mrs. Skiles always "dressed" even to putting on her watch and chain before starting to cook breakfast. The children wore dainty low neck dresses over pin stitched, embroidered and ruffled underwear. Sometimes the dresses were decorated with bright colors of applique. Dainty little sacks were worn over the dresses on cool days.

Material for clothing and food were usually purchased in San Antonio about twice each year. Sewing kept Mrs. Skiles and her daughters and daughter-in-law busy. The "pin stitching" was similar to the present-day hemstitching. Frequently several rows were placed close together which produced a lacy or open work effect. The men's shirts were hand pleated. The women did beautiful embroidery and knitted all the lace used for trimming. Miss Maggie Skiles still remembers when the first sewing machine was bought. It was small and had to be clamped onto a table and "turned by hand." It made a chain stitch very much like the stitch used on some feed sacks of today. If a thread "was caught" it all unravelled out. But, even at that it was a big labor saver.

While the clothes were beautifully made and displayed exquisite taste their love of beauty was perhaps better expressed in the "quilts" made of lovely old patterns. They made "piece quilts" and "appliqued quilts" of both silk and cotton scraps. The "hexagon" was a favorite pattern for the pieced quilts, while the "grape pattern" was a favorite for the applique. Some were also tufted. The pattern for quilting also added much charm and beauty to the quilts. The grandchildren who inherited these treasures marvel at the short, even and smooth stitches they put in by hand.

Water was hauled in barrels from the river at first for drinking purposes and for general household use. Later a cistern was dug. Soap came from home-made lye. Both the washing and ironing were done by Mrs. Skiles and the girls.

Indians Not a Menace

Fortunately Mrs. Skiles had no fear of the Indians. The men when riding, frequently saw them hiding from tree to tree. They would steal and pilfer but did not kill. Because of wild animals, Mrs. Skiles did have to watch the children to keep them from straying too far from home. One of their favorite sports was to swim in the river. One day when one of the children was sitting on the bank dressing after a swim, an alligator coming down the river reached up and ate the little black dog that was still in the river.

Cooking was done on the open fire-places in Dutch ovens and iron kettles. Corn meal was ground at home. "Jerked" beef and pickled beef were nearly always available. There was plenty of milk, butter and eggs. Vegetables were scarce because it was so dry that very little was produced in the garden during the earlier years. Wine and preserves were made from the wild grapes.

One of the jokes that members of the family enjoy telling even now is about the wine. Colonel Skiles always helped with the wine making. He put it in demijohns and kept them in the hall. One time they corked it too soon and during the night it blew up.

Chas. Henry had studied medicine before moving from Kentucky. Apparently it was always a pleasure to him to nurse the sick in the neighborhood. He never accepted pay for his services. He bought medicine in bulk and measured out doses on apothecary scales.

They traded in Floresville and Panna Maria, a Polish settlement.

The children who lived to become

grown and married were Carolyn, who married John M. Beverly in Kentucky; Charles Henry, known among the cattlemen as "Burch" Skiles, married Margaret Ann Arbuckle of Seguin; and Mary Downing Skiles, an adopted daughter, married C. A. Whetstone. They all lived in houses in the same yard near enough to each other to be included in the plan for connecting the houses all under one roof. Their interest in educational and cultural pursuits created atmosphere that was mentally and spiritually stimulating and satisfying to each other.

When the grand children were large enough to attend school all hope for building the college had been abandoned. A governess was employed at first. Later all except Maggie attended the public schools in Falls City. She stayed with her grandfather Arbuckle in Seguin and went to school there.

Sunday Service Held

The members of the Skiles family were devout Presbyterians. They rarely ever had an opportunity of attending church services except when the circuit rider preacher came. But each child was taught the catechism on Sunday mornings. Later they attended Union Sunday school in Falls City.

Mrs. Skiles died in 1873, and Colonel Skiles in 1886. He lived in the home of his son, Charles, and after Charles' death continued to live with his family. He was devoted to his grandchildren and to Texas. He visited his old home in Kentucky after his wife's death, but he made his son-in-law, John M. Beverly promise, that if he should die there he would bring his body back to Texas for burial.

Until his death, and many years afterward the family continued to practice rigid economy. The women knitted stockings for the family for years. Fires were fanned by hand bellows. They made clothes for both the men and women of the family. "I'll never forget the thrill of my first pair of lace shoes with green stars on the sides, and brass caps on the toes to keep them from kicking out so soon," declares Miss Maggie Skiles.

Though the dream of building a town containing a church, and a college; of developing a great farming area and a big cattle industry for himself and his children was never realized, the dilapidated ruins of the Skiles home are still standing as a monumental evidence of the efforts of the early Texas home makers who paved the way for the comforts and conveniences of the civilization enjoyed in that section today.

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